

ARTICLE



The Resurgence of Social Movements

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Abstract

Starting in the early nineteen seventies, there were mainly two opposed perspectives in the sociological debate on social movements, illustrated on the one hand by Charles Tilly and on the other by Alain Touraine, which this article follows. The concept of 'social movement' has been used to analyse the working *class* movement, the new social movements and global movements. Is it useful to analyse the struggles that developed recently within the Muslim and/or Arab world, and the actors that have been called *indignados* in Spain and that appeared in many countries? Is there any unity in these movements?



Keywords

social movements, Arab spring, social revolution, indignados

INTRODUCTION

The sociology of social movements could be helpful in analysing contemporary actors that more or less successfully try to put an end to authoritarian regimes in Arab and/or Muslim countries, and those that act to impose new forms of struggle against social injustice and in favor of democracy in several western countries – those actors that sometimes refer to the famous book by Stéphane Hessel, *Indignez-vous!*. The same sociology could also help us to test the hypothesis of unity within these various actions.

A first condition is that we can propose a precise concept of 'social movement', a rather controversial category in sociology, and that we can give a historical account of the specificity of the recent conflicts and struggles. Is it possible to consider that this could mean entering a new era, a new cycle of social movements, the fourth since the end of World War II?

In less than half a century, we have witnessed three social figures in succession, all with the potential of incarnating a social movement. In the first instance, the paradigmatic figure of the sociology of social movements, the

working class movement, at its height in the 1960s before starting on its historical decline. The end of the 1960s saw the appearance of the 'new social movements'; it was permissible to think these indicated entry into the age of post-industrial society but they lost impetus towards the end of the 1970s, even if their ideas and their protests continued to constitute powerful forces for modernization and cultural change. The sympathies and convictions of the anti-nuclear activists, ecologists and feminists in particular permeated the whole political sphere and profoundly renewed the cultural scene. Finally, from the end of the 1990s, new struggles - this time 'global' - began to take shape, the alter-globalist movement for example, indicating entry into a new historical phase much more distinctly and in a different way from the new social movements. These struggles have also lost their impetus in the wake of important developments in the present-day world. The 11 September 2001 attacks, the 'war against terrorism' in Iraq and Afghanistan, then the world economic crisis from 2008, all considerably weakened the aspects which made them social movements to the advantage in particular of political and ideological categories dominated by anti-Americanism, anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism.



During this period, sociological thinking was mainly dominated by the confrontation of two paradigms. The first, the theory of mobilization of resources defined a social movement as collective action taking the form of rational behaviour aimed at enabling the actor to enter a political system and to remain there. The name of Charles Tilly, who died recently, by far predominates in this current of thought. The second paradigm was suggested by Alain Touraine to account for the action of an actor, in a conflictive social relationship, opposed to a class adversary who dominates and rules, for the control of the major orientations of community life. This is what Touraine refers to as historicity: “The social movement is the organised collective behaviour of a class actor struggling against his class adversary for the social control of historicity in a concrete community”.¹ This corresponds, not to the concrete reality of struggles, or to their meanings taken as a whole, but only to one meaning amongst many possible others, which is often more visible or more overwhelmingly present. Furthermore, the paradigms of Tilly and Touraine, both of which were first formulated when the working-class movement was at its height, in the 1960s, are not necessarily contradictory.

1. IS THIS CONCEPT STILL RELEVANT IN THE ERA OF GLOBALISATION?

a. Two distinct paradigms

Over the last fifty years, sociological theory in the field of social movements has been structured by two main paradigms. The first, the theory of resource mobilisation, considers that a social movement is a collective action defined by rational behaviours aiming to enable the collective actor to enter a political system, and stay within it. The historian Charles Tilly, who died recently, is the person best known for this family of approaches. Many other social scientists belong to this intellectual group, including Donatella Della Porta, Sidney Tarrow and Mario Diani. The second paradigm was proposed by Alain Touraine to analyse the way a dominated and directed actor participates in a socially conflictive relationship. In this the actor is up against a ruling and dominating adversary to control the main orientations of collective life, the so-called historicity: “the social movement is the collective behaviour of an actor fighting against an adversary in order to lead socially historicity within a

concrete collectivity”.² In this perspective, the social movement does not correspond to the reality of all struggles and all their meanings, but to only one among many that may or not be more visible, more influential or more significant.

The paradigms of both Tilly and Touraine were formulated in the 1960s, when the working class movement was at its summit. They do not necessarily contradict each other.

The theoretical debate between these two families of approaches has changed with time, and some significant inflexions have been made. But we can consider that this opposition is still valid, and that from a paradigmatic point of view, it structures today the debate between the main sociological researches dealing with social conflicts. The demonstration provided by Antimo Farro³ at the beginning of the 21st century is still pertinent: it is clear that two distinct visions of the social movement exist today, one mainly interested in the strategies and calculations of actors, the other dealing mainly with the meaning of their action. As will become clear, this article is closer to the second of these perspectives.

b. Towards a new conceptualisation

Adopting the approach suggested by Alain Touraine, in a recent publication I proposed listing the figures in the recent history of the social movement in function of five main criteria.⁴ These criteria are: i) the context of the action (national, international or global); ii) the nature of the domination called into question by the actor; iii) the nature of the action, either specifically social or to some extent endowed with a cultural input; iv) the relation of the social movement to the State and the political system; v) the concept of the ‘subject’ underlying the action: is the subject social, cultural or an individual?

I only return to this outline typology to insist on a decisive point: the further one goes from the golden age, symbolised by the sociology of social movements by the working-class movement at its peak – at least in democratic, industrial societies – the more difficult it seems to be to apply the initial concept as defined by Tilly or by Touraine. Thus, can the context of the action really be global or transnational, as it is to some extent for the alter-global movement? Is it not of necessity national, as the advocates of Tilly-type hypotheses suggest in relation to this same movement, since they are much more interested in comparing the forms it takes in different countries than in its global dimensions?⁵ A social movement is considered an action in which the dominated and the dominators, the

1 Alain Touraine (1982), p. 77.

2 Alain Touraine (1978), p. 103.

3 Antimo L. Farro (2000).

4 Michel Wieviorka (2010).

5 cf. for example Agrikolianski, Fillieule and Mayer (2005). For a truly global perspective, not restricted to the context of the Nation-State, the reference publication is that of Geoffrey Pleyers (2010).



leaders and the led, confront one another in a conflictive relation defined within a specific community. This was seen in the recent past when the working-class movement was clearly opposed to the employers. But, can one still describe something as a social movement when the action seems to be predominantly conveyed by actors incapable of designating a social class adversary, or, more importantly, do not even wish to do so.

c. Three possible answers

Three main answers can be formulated here. The first is based on a historical analysis and stating that the initial concept of the social movement has ceased to be relevant. This is, quite simply, as a result of our entry into a world devoid of movements of this sort: a world in which collective action, when it does exist, can only be convulsive, characterised by violence and a desire for rupture, tending towards revolution. This world could be described perhaps by the most disenchanted. For them the triumph of democracy prophesied at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, by Francis Fukuyama,⁶ only conceals a quite different reality: the triumph of post-democracy, in the words of Colin Crouch,⁷ and therefore of the power of experts and the media over an atomised society.

This first answer cannot be really admitted, for it ignores many struggles that developed during the 80's, 90's and the start of the 21st century. It is true that these conflicts were generally less massive or spectacular than in the 1960s and 1970s. But they had their importance, for instance as far as the environment and human rights were at stake.

The second theoretical answer pleads for a re-conceptualisation, once again, of social movement. Should this concept not be re-worked in order to rediscover an idea of conflict, and more precisely of conflictive social relationship? By doing this in a way which frees us from the over-classical reference to the social movement, we will be able to examine, generally, the interplay of the social forces struggling to control and direct historicity, and to envisage how society works by itself, whatever the type of society under consideration, industrial, post-industrial or networked, etc. Then all that would remain would be to apply this updated concept to the struggles which, in our hypothesis, have elements of a social movement.

Finally, the third answer is, like the first, historical. It requires considering the long period following the decline of the working-class movement as a phase of transition, with the social struggles as forms of action which foreshadow but do not yet convey the shift to a new era, while remaining weak, disorganised and incapable of establishing a high

level of project over a long period of time. From this point of view, the researchers who spoke of 'new social movements' (including myself) were perhaps too hasty in seeing the advent of this new era. We were not sufficiently sensitive to the transitional nature of these forms of action, still too frequently characterised by categories, references and a vocabulary which continue to owe a lot to the working-class movement and its struggles. This third answer is therefore a plea to maintain the idea that our societies are produced through their conflicts and, more precisely, their social movements. It considers that this concept remains relevant and that it must quite simply be recognised that a long interim period began with the exit from an industrial society.

This answer is different from approaches such as Sidney Tarrow's that promote the notion of protest cycles,⁸ and consider that social movements analysed along the lines of Tilly can go through high or low stages that correspond to the political opportunities at any given moment. In fact, here the analysis of the decomposition of old meanings and the emergence of new ones is of much more interest than the analysis of variations within political offer or opportunities.

2. ENDING THE FOCUS ON THE WEST

More and more frequently, social scientists accept distancing themselves from the methodological nationalism denounced by Ulrich Beck,⁹ they think globally, and have a strong interest in transnationalism. But it is also true that, despite what they may say, social scientists have long been, and often still are, profoundly ethnocentric, convinced that their work concerns the whole world or that their theories could be applied everywhere, whereas they have only been valid for a restricted number of societies. It must also be clearly stated that the exit from the industrial age which we have just referred to does not apply to the whole of the planet but to a few western societies which are, moreover, mainly those where social sciences came into being. Here we must make two important comments.

On one hand, it must be admitted that we are emerging not only from the industrial age, but also from the long phase of transition which followed, described at the outset as post-industrial. On the other hand, it must be recognised that not only is the age of colonisation behind us, but also that which followed. This age has often been referred to as post-colonial: societies which were colonised more recently are now capable of functioning, of changing and thinking by themselves at a level of autonomy which is not fundamentally different from that of the former colonial powers.

6 Francis Fukuyama (1989).

7 Colin Crouch (2004).

8 Sidney Tarrow (1998).

9 Ulrich Beck (2006).



These two observations have important implications from the point of view of the arena of contemporary social movements. In this perspective, western societies can envisage new discussions, new conflicts, over and above the social movements specific to the industrial age, and also beyond the new social movements of the 1970s. Furthermore, the societies which were colonised can now act by themselves, and not only to liberate themselves from former colonial powers or to endeavour to imitate them. After a tumultuous half century, characterised for many of these societies by the establishment of authoritarian regimes, they are becoming the stage for social movements which are in no way different from their counterparts in western societies.

The present panorama of social struggles at the level of the planet constitutes a pressing invitation to envisage, in this perspective, the third of our possible answers to the question of knowing what to do with the concept of social movements today. The need is not so much for the concept to be reconfigured as to be applied to the struggles which, today, are reshaping the image of numerous societies whether or not they are western, developed and democratic.

3. WRONG TRACKS

Throughout the 1980s, 1990s and even in the new century, it has been difficult to recognise the existence of social movements, and even more so to locate those at the centre of the production of collective life. It was as if the exit from the industrial age and the historical decline of the working-class movement had reduced social struggles to defensive, of little consequence, while the damage done by colonisation, even a long time after, had more impact than the emergence of new societies.

Then two waves of struggles, both of which were unexpected, changed the perspective. The first was constituted by movements which rocked the whole of the Arab and Muslim world with the aim of putting an end to authoritarian regimes. The Iranian Green Movement in 2008, protesting against the widespread rigging of the elections by the dictatorial power of the Ayatollahs, can be considered the start of this wave, which truly took off in December 2010 with the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia. The second was the actions of the *indignados* – the social actors who take their name, as we have seen, from a former diplomat, over 90 years old, Stéphane Hessel, whose essay entitled ‘*Time for Outrage. Indignez-vous!*’¹⁰ became a world best-seller in a few months.

Whether about the first or the second, a fundamental question was posed: Was there a unity of action in each of these waves, possibly in both, comparable to the popu-

lar uprisings in 1848 or the movements symbolised by the mere mention of the year 1968?

a. Revolutions?

The neo-Marxists are convinced there is. They see in the present-day uprisings, beginning with those which are traversing the Arab and Muslim world, the return of the Revolution heralding the emancipation of the people, the *Réveil de l'Histoire* or the *Awakening of History* to quote the title of a book by the French philosopher, Alain Badiou.¹¹ The “end of history” prophesied by Francis Fukuyama in 1989 is effectively behind us. But the unity of action of the present-day protest movements in Europe (Spain, Italy, Greece in particular), Latin America (especially in Chile), the United States, Israel and in the Arab and Muslim world can in no way be defined by the image of a shared revolutionary wind of change.

On the whole, the actors do not aspire to revolution; they do not tend towards taking over state power. Some wanted to put an end to a dictatorship and open the path to democracy in a non-violent manner. It took the murderous obstinacy of Muammar Gaddafi for the protest in Libya to be transformed into armed action. Others demand changes which a democracy should be able to handle: measures against the damage caused by the crisis or to control the banking and financial system, re-launching of the welfare state, educational policy appropriate for low incomes, etc.

b. Middle classes?

We are so far from revolution that it is even tempting, at first sight, to disagree with Alain Badiou and take the opposite view, namely that these are movements characteristic of the middle classes struggling to promote interests which are to some extent selfish. This is quite the opposite of the working masses, the proletariat and other groups symbolic of the Revolution freeing themselves of their chains to liberate the whole of humankind. Effectively, there are those who have risen up against a dictatorship (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, etc.), against the banking and financial world (Wall Street), to recover a welfare state damaged by neo-liberal policies (Israel), against the drastic measures of budgetary rigor imposed by the IMF and the European lenders (Greece), for free and democratic education (Chile), to denounce the widespread unemployment of young people (Spain) etc. But these are not so much workers, or proletarians, but relatively educated middle class people – the ‘petty bourgeoisie’ which Marxism constantly put down while at the same time occasionally wondering whether they had the capacity to join the ‘just’ struggle of the working classes and

10 Stéphane Hessel (2010).

11 Alain Badiou (2011).



act in the direction of History. If we consider the movements which are today transforming the Arab and Muslim world, they are also extremely popular which means that they do include, but not exclusively, numerous actors from the educated middle classes. It is unjust to postulate the unity of the *indignados* on the basis of them supposedly belonging to the petty bourgeoisie or the middle classes. Apart from the fact that little thought is given as to whether or not these are the actors in question, this reduces them to their prime characteristics, pays no attention to the meaning of their action, and fails to consider their orientations. And, finally, it reduces them to the image of intermediary categories endeavouring to retain an acquired position, or else to ensure their opportunities for upward social mobility. This is singularly lacking in imagination.

c. Networks and communication

In these situations, does the unity not reside in the forms of the action which, according to Charles Tilly, are always the same 'repertoire', particularly social networks and new communication technologies? This observation is almost useless: who does not use these networks and these new technologies today? Who believes that the *indignados* and the actors in the Arab and Muslim revolutions have made a highly original use of these technologies?

This being the case, it is tempting to postulate a lack of unity. It is true that, for example, the non-violent overthrow of a dictatorship to establish democracy and social justice, the occupation of schools and universities to effect change in the educational system or protests against the damage caused by neo-liberalism or the austerity measures imposed to deal with the crisis, are obviously not of the same nature. Moreover each of the present-day movements are defined first and foremost in the context of a nation-state and do not allow themselves to be side-tracked by international concerns. Thus, the movement of erecting tents in Israel is not concerned with the Israeli-Palestine conflict. In the demonstrations in Egypt and in Tunisia we saw national flags being waved. And those who went under the banner 'Occupy Wall Street' had nothing special to say about the mobilisations in North Africa or the Near East.

In fact, insisting on the heterogeneity of the actors reveals the extremely vague nature of the vocabulary of indignation and the ambiguity of the references to the people. Neither 'indignation' nor the theme of the 'people' enables us to envisage the political and historical dimensions of the action, informs us as to its precise meanings or the social relationships which it challenges. They both set action at the pre-political stage and preclude any prediction of what could be a democratic passage to the political. They note and denounce injustice, oppression and exclusion, marking the entry into a public sphere with no political structuring. Indignation is politically unspecified and the same applies to the idea of the people. Moreover,

both can open the path to violence or to radical temptation whether Islamist or other.

4. THE RETURN OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

This was our starting point for thinking about the unity of the struggles of the *indignados* and the movements in the Arab and Muslim world. Other conflicts could be added, which have attracted less attention from the media beginning with those that, in their thousands and even tens of thousands, have mobilised urban and village populations alike, in China, against the local leaders, the misuse of their authority and their links with corruption and private speculation.

The unity of the present struggles resides neither in a revolutionary awakening of history, with the actors belonging to a particular social circle, nor in their resort to social networks and the Internet – which has become commonplace today in all sorts of fields. It is only a very small extension of alter-globalism. Even if, in October 2011, Chilean students came to Europe to request the support of their French counterparts and others, with the help of Edgar Morin and Stéphane Hessel, or if attempts are being made to make the action international and to give it a planet-wide meaning which leads us to a criticism of neo-liberal capitalism. While these struggles do challenge dictatorships or weak and inadequate political systems and have a strong political impact, their unity is not to be found in the idea of an action which is primarily or exclusively political. They appeal to social justice, they denounce forms of exclusion, social rejection and the lost or denied opportunities for upward social mobility. They express frustrations and disappointments which are all the more intense as, with modern means of communication and information, every individual can see inequalities becoming greater and those who are better off having full access to the fruits of modernity.

No, over and above possible violent deviations, over and above the criticisms which the actors express about the established political systems, unity resides in the growing desire which they signal to force a change in politics and in the social and cultural accusations which this criticism and this desire convey. These actors indicate the mobilisation of generations who were not involved in politics, distrusted it or were not interested in it, who wish to participate in the life of the City in a different way. They do not want to be involved in parties and classical forms of mobilisation and so those who contribute to the re-enchantment of democracy by inventing new forms of participation and deliberation. In passing, they also challenge the classical figure of the intellectual; they do not want the meaning of their action to be defined from the outside by an intelligentsia who considers it has the monopoly of political analysis and



knowledge. This does not exclude them from forming relationships with intellectuals, or discussing with them, as we have just seen in relation to Morin and Hessel.

The indignados, the movements which traverse the Arab and Muslim world and many other worlds such as the Russia of Putin, or China and its free market socialism, in their best and most innovative aspects, invent words, practices and a repertoire. They no longer burden themselves, as did previous generation, with ideologies, categories, militant reactions or methods which date from another era. On the contrary, they are telling the parties in power, the classical representatives of politics and the intellectuals, that it is high time they changed, invented new ways of being committed, a new culture for action while at the same time they express strong moral protest. And they are saying this not to take over power but to ensure their living conditions change, a future opens up and their social and cultural demands are listened to and dealt with.

Their action has considerable and even decisive implications; it mitigates the violence which is the contrary of institutionalised conflict and not its condition, its expression or its extension. This explains why the present decline of Al Qaeda is not only due to the death of Bin Laden but also, and primarily, to the loud and clear message which the Tunisian, Egyptian and other movements are sending to Muslims all over the world. Namely, for the whole of the Arab and Muslim world there is a way of living other than armed struggle and terrorism. Similarly, if violence does sometimes occur when the *indignados* mobilise, it is not the result of the democratic core of the movement, its demands for social justice or its non-violent refusal of inequalities. This violence takes place at the margin – where the place of a programme or vision for the future is taken over by ideology, the desire for revolution or anarchy, or even the recourse to violence for its own sake.

We are entering, in a faltering and uncoordinated manner to be sure, a period of renovation of social, political and cultural protest. It is possible that the struggles which have given rise to this image may disintegrate, and that radical Islamism, violence, processes of hatred and

closed communities may triumph. But how can we not see that cultural innovation, the appeal to morality or justice, the assertion of democracy and the non-violent challenge of various forms of domination have sustained the emergence of these movements?

If we accept the definition of the concept of social movement proposed by Alain Touraine, it is then clear that the various challenges and protests which have just been described do include a social movement component. Of course they involve more than that, and their political input, in particular, is considerable. But their actors, by their conflictive behaviour, also contribute to the production of social life, providing new cultural directions, endeavouring to orientate them in the expectation that the state will create the conditions for their action, without necessarily attempting to take over power. There is a possibility that these struggles will come to a sudden end or go wrong, that their actors be crushed by forces of repression, or tempted to deviate to radicalism. But whatever the case, these struggles either signal the return of social movements in societies which thought they had more or less forgotten them, or else their emergence in societies which public opinion at a global level had considered incapable of acting by themselves.

To add a last remark, the sociology of social movements is somewhat romantic, mainly open to the more positive or constructive aspects of the struggles they take into consideration. However, this sociology is not blind when it is necessary to also take into account the dark side of social conflicts: tendencies towards sectarianism, violence, racism, xenophobia, or when the risk or realities of terrorism or totalitarianism appear. Its first goal is to analyse the more positive and constructive meanings of an action, but it also has to be able to deal with dimensions that may be called ‘anti social movements’, which I called “evil” in a recent book.¹² Social sciences are there in order to produce knowledge, not to propose apologies or ideologies. They analyse specific struggles, aiming to find a social movement, but they can also discover other important dimensions, including those that are counterproductive or the complete opposite of a social movement. ■

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